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AUTHOR Moneyhun, Clyde
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ABSTRACT

The classical marketplace metaphor for intellectual exchange forms the ideological basis for the way argument is still taught in composition classrooms, where supposedly students are being prepared to participate as full citizens in an equal democracy. However, such a view of democratic citizenship, free speech, and argument is open to criticism for many reasons. Three chapters on argument from commonly used composition textbooks were analyzed for signs of this ideology. The textbooks described argument as practiced by equal participants on a level playing field. Participants must play by the rules, according to the texts. Facts and figures that are judged scientifically are privileged forms of information. The texts ask writers to move toward a consensus rather than become involved as interested partisans. Many teachers continue to believe in the myth of democratic participation. Karl Marx has critiqued such a position as being merely the veiled tricks of the ruling class to maintain control and power. Oppressed peoples must be convinced that they are not, in fact, oppressed. Preaching to economic and social subordinates that they are democratically "equal" to their oppressors is to obscure the truth of their situation and to deny them freedom and reality. Thus, teaching composition must be altered from its current dependence on the democratic myth to a model more in tune with the liberating tendencies of radical pedagogies. (Contains 15 references.) (HB)

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Clyde Moneyhun
Department of English
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721

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Clyde Moneyhun
Department of English
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721
April 3, 1993

Argument, Free Speech, and the Politics of
Deliberation in the Composition Classroom
(A paper presented at the 1993 Conference on College
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Since the Greeks, rhetoricians have taught argument in the context of democratic participation. Aristotle says in The Rhetoric that a man who cannot defend his ideas in the marketplace should be ashamed of himself (6). Ideally, citizens come together in an environment of free intellectual exchange in order to represent their interests and advance the public good. Wayne Booth calls such activity a "meeting of minds in symbolic exchange," in which the interlocutors work toward compromise and consensus in a forum of open debate. This marketplace metaphor for intellectual exchange forms the ideological basis for the way argument is still taught in composition classrooms, where (we often say) we are preparing students to participate as full citizens in a democracy that offers equal opportunities to all. Listen to the language used by Janie Hydrick, NCTE President-Elect, in the 1993 Call for Papers: "Our children . . . must be able and willing to buy into democracy. Each child must be a stockholder in the universal franchise. Language can give them purchasing power."

However, this view of democratic citizenship, free speech, and argument is open to criticism from many quarters. The problem with Booth's formula about "minds meeting in symbolic exchange" is that "minds" inhabit bodies, and

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bodies are assigned genders, classes, and races that determine the value of the symbols they bring to the marketplace. The abstract space in which all citizens meet as equals does not exist; what appears to be compromise expresses the power of those who control the debate. Feminist political scientists Nancy Hartsock and Carole Pateman have deconstructed the "free marketplace of ideas," showing it to be a controlled economy in which some shoppers arrive with more buying power than others. As Ronald Reagan put it during a 1980 Republican primary debate, "Hey, I paid for this microphone." And in our own field, Paulo Freire and Richard Ohmann, among many others, have shown that if we teach composition as an exercise in democratic citizenship, we are working in support of an oppressive social system by helping to confuse and obscure the realities of racial, sexual, and economic inequalities.

In 1976, Ohmann indicted composition textbooks for helping spread the lie of corporate America that all men are equal, that opportunity beckons to all, that only the weak, the stupid, and the lazy fail in a democratic paradise. More recently John Clifford has done similar work with an analysis of the rhetoric of The St. Martin's Guide. Following their examples, I went to the argument chapters of several textbooks to help organize my thinking about this presentation: Axelrod and Cooper's St. Martin's Guide, Crews' Random House Handbook, and McCrimmon's Writing With a Purpose. I chose the texts at random from among the books on the shelf in my office. All three have been used at my school at one time or another, or are still being used.

The first move these texts make in defining argument is the construction of the participants as equals, and the plane of argument as a "level playing field" where the participants meet as willing partners to the transaction. These elements of equality and voluntariness leave the participants "free to accept or reject the belief or proposal" being debated without coercion (McCrimmon et al.

329), free to consider the logic of the case "on its own merits" (Crews 74), a legalistic phrase that appears again and again in argument texts. The arguers, the space in which they meet, and the topics they debate float spinning in abstraction like a satellite in space, cut loose from the material world that creates the very possibility of their existence. Ohmann observes that readers and writers of college arguments are "outside the social nexus," "prophylactically sealed in an environment of disinterestedness" (156). In fact, the material conditions of their lives operate in these texts as a hindrance to their freedom, objectivity, and effectiveness as arguers.

Argument as it is taught by these textbooks requires the participants to play by rules that favor those who are more powerful in the material world beyond the abstractions of argument. There will be no "raised voices, doors slammed, names called" (Axelrod and Cooper 468), no "prior sympathy" (Crews 74) or "bias" (McCrimmon et al. 335). The passion, the pain, the anger, the righteous indignation caused by suffering in the real world will be left behind when arguers ascend to the plane of argument. There will be instead an atmosphere of sobriety, reasonableness, neutrality, and fairness--each term another name for the prohibition against locating arguers and arguments in the material world of exploitation, poverty, and oppression. Ohmann describes the goal of liberal argument as the effort to "play down conflict of interest," "to absorb all points of view, and amalgamate them into a great consensus" (189). To this end, a participant may not describe "his personal involvement, what he has at stake, who he takes to be on his side and who on the other side--much less his social class, family connections, income, race, or sex" (189).

At the same time, "the real world" is constructed in a very particular way that puts it beyond the scope of any genuine conflict. The reliance on "facts and figures" and "hard information" (Crews 69) that can be "measured

and verified by objective means" (Axelrod and Cooper 472) goes beyond the positivistic fallacy of belief in an unproblematic "reality." It is in fact a means of diverting attention away from the material world where arguers must live even as they attempt to create an abstract space separate from it. It is a way of denying manifest and perhaps unresolvable differences between arguers, and of moving the discourse to a level "beyond any dispute" (Crews 69). The rules of evidence under which certain facts are admissible and others inadmissible are slanted to favor the more powerful participant in the argument. All the trappings of "objectivity-- "hard data," the inferences that may be drawn from them, the testimony of acceptable "experts"--all create a very particular "real world," where the social and economic inequalities that determine the relative power of the speakers are not argumentative "facts." John Clifford asserts that such thinking "is more than naive; it denies identity, represses class conflict, negates the way ideas originate in specific social configurations" (44).

I'd like to consider one of the classic moves of formal argumentation, one covered by all major argument texts: the strategy of stating and answering the objections of an opponent. Students are told to "[i]dentify with your readers," to put themselves "imaginatively in their place" in order to "establish an area of agreement that you intend to broaden" (McCrimmon et al. 332). A "shrewd arguer" will raise objections in order to neutralize them, refuting those differences that can be "shown to be untrue," conceding others in order to minimize them (Crews 67, emphasis added). Far from weakening an argument, textbooks explain, "readers respond positively to this strategy," since the writer "appears to have explored the issue thoroughly" and "seems thoughtful and reasonable, more interested in inquiry than advocacy, more concerned with seeking the truth . . . than in ignoring or overriding readers' objections in order to win their adherence to a self-serving claim" (Axelrod and Cooper 482,

emphasis added). One textbook assures us that "[t]his kind of initial identification is not a trick; you are not pretending to be something you are not" (McCrimmon et al. 332). But the emphasis is clearly on the creation of the appearance of consensus and agreement in the face of real conflict and difference. We see once again the pattern of denying differences, of pretending that there is no inequality and no conflict between writer and reader, and of trying to convince an opponent that the speaker is a disinterested defender of the public good, not a partisan with an interested stake in the outcome of the argument.

Argument texts usually list a series of "logical fallacies" to avoid, many of which betray the ideology I've been trying to describe. I'll take a look at just one of them: the prohibition against ad hominem attacks, which is defined as the fallacy of saying that opponents are who they are. One text describes ad hominem argument as a "fallacious shortcut" around the reasonableness, detachment, and impartiality of more proper methods of argument (Crews 64). It is wrong, for example, to support an antipollution initiative just because "the oil and highway lobbies are doing everything in their power to defeat it" (Crews 64), and it is wrong to oppose a bill because a Congressman who supports it is a scoundrel (McCrimmon et al. 367).

Underlying these injunctions to fairness, however, are the same motives as those that underlie all the other elements of liberal argumentation: the discounting of vested interests on the part of the speakers, the denial of power differences between the speakers, the stacking of the deck against the less powerful speakers. In an argument with Exxon lobbyists about an antipollution measure, I am supposed to imagine that we debate the topic coolly and logically, that our words carry the same weight in the public forum, that our arguments will be judged "on their own merits." If I simply lay out my

facts, play by the rules, and avoid committing the ad hominem fallacy of pointing out who my opponent actually is, my argument will carry the day.

I tried to get a picture in my head of things happening just this way, but I couldn't do it. John Clifford says sarcastically, "I can just imagine my students using cogent reasons and cold facts to persuade Jesse Helms to support abortion rights or funding for AIDS patients, or perhaps students could use logic and statistics to persuade their professors to give up tenure or to convince the tobacco industry to make the ethical gesture of switching its crops to bean sprouts" (44). Ohmann imagines "Cesar Chavez leading the brothers Gallo through the 'process of thought' by which he arrived at his position" (156). Instead, of course, Chavez and many other speakers arguing from subordinate positions have committed many logical fallacies, refused to play by the rules, called their oppressors by the names they deserve. For Marx, the only theory of social change that makes any sense is the argumentum ad hominem, which identifies conflict where it exists in the real world rather than avoiding it in the ideal world of bourgeois debate (Marx, "Contribution" 18).

Why do so many of us, so many teachers and so many students, believe in the myth of democratic participation? Why do we believe, in other words, that a method for argumentation among equals will also serve arguers who are not equal to one another, who are in fact in a relationship of oppressor and oppressed? Because liberal democratic ideology has convinced us that what is good for the dominant classes is good for everybody. The revolution that gave us the principles of citizenship, free speech, and democratic representation was only a partial revolution, one that created an illusory legalistic freedom for all of us, but real material freedom only for the propertied classes.[1] In order to

[1]A "partial," or bourgeois, revolution occurs when "a determinate class undertakes, from its particular situation, a general emancipation of society.

rule, the dominant classes must spread the ideology that there are no classes, that all members of society are equal, that civil or legal equality is the same as economic equality, and that therefore the interests of the ruling class represent the interests of all the people.[2]

Convincing oppressed people that they are not oppressed is a big job. It is accomplished in large part by what has come to be called "ideological hegemony." According to classic Marxism, "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that . . . the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx, *The German Ideology* 134). For Gramsci, this control of the means of intellectual production gives the ruling classes a much more efficient means of oppression than mere violence. Through the myth of democratic participation, ideological pressure can be brought to bear on the oppressed classes, "so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom'" (242).

In the model of liberal argument I've been examining, the disempowered are drawn into a false sense of empowerment through the illusion of freedom, and the disenfranchised into a false sense of enfranchisement through the illusion of choice. Nancy Hartsock and Carole Pateman criticize the elaborate democratic subterfuge that allows oppression to masquerade as freedom, necessity as choice. For Hartsock, the main culprit is the marketplace

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This class emancipates society as a whole, but only on condition that the whole of society is in the same situation as this class; for example, that it possess or can easily acquire money or culture" (Marx, "Contribution" 20).

[2]Every ruling class "is compelled . . . to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society . . .: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones" (Marx, *The German Ideology* 138).

metaphor for human interaction, the very one that informs the entire structure of liberal argumentation: "[B]ecause the market model allows theories to present . . . systematic inequality . . . as . . . equality, and . . . to transform coercion into choice, they should be read as complicated shell games that operate to conceal rather than reveal relations among people" (20). In other words, the very rhetorical structure that promises freedom and equality among all members of society in fact serves only to perpetuate the rule of some groups over others by masking the truth of domination.

For Pateman, Western contract theory reveals the falsehood of the elements of equality and free choice at the core of the market metaphor. According to Rousseau and other contract theorists, including our own Founding Fathers, human beings freely and rationally enter into negotiations with one another, trading the absolute freedom to do as they please for social freedoms such as freedom from fear of attack. In reality, says Pateman, the parties to contracts are never equal, but are always in a relationship of domination and subordination. One party writes the contract and the other party signs it. The function of the contract is to create the illusion of free choice, democratic participation, equality between participants. The effect is, in one and the same movement, to include the subordinate party in the democratic process in an abstract, theoretical sense and to exclude her in a concrete, material sense: to free her in theory, but enslave her in fact, and to enlist her cooperation in her own oppression.[3] I saw an astonishing example of this in a display case at the University of Arizona Law School Library: a

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[3]"The genius of contract theorists has been to present both the original contract and actual contracts as exemplifying and securing individual freedom. On the contrary, in contract theory universal freedom is always an hypothesis, a story, a political fiction. Contract always generates political right in the form of relations of domination and subordination" (Pateman 8).

written contract between an eighteenth century American landowner and a thirteen-year-old girl, an indentured servant. Such contracts render the idea of freedom and rationality in American political life ludicrous, and stand as symbols of the entire myth of democratic participation.

Even though a subordinate may pretend that she is equal to her social and economic superior in a contract, she is still far from exercising democratic freedom and choice. In the same way, when a subordinate pretends that he is equal to his dominant opponent in an argument, he performs not an act of democratic empowerment, but an act of self-enslavement. To preach to social and economic subordinates that they are democratically "equal" to their oppressors is to obscure the truth of their situation and to deny them any means of redressing real grievances. Peggy McIntosh has traced the function of this mechanism in the context of race relations, where the white ideology about equal opportunity is "about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominace while denying that systems of dominance exist," (36), and where

> obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept stronly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already. (36)

When we teach argument as an exercise in democratic citizenship, then, when we insist that our students masquerade as freely negotiating democratic equals, we participate in the perpetuation of race, class, and gender inequality. Althusser feels that in modern times, education has taken the place of the

Church as the principle arm of the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes. He wonders how many of us, well-intentioned as we are, devoted as we are to empowering our students, how many of us "do not even suspect the 'work' the system . . . forces [us] to do," so that "[our] own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment" of the reigning ideology (157).

Paulo Freire calls every kind of education that supports the status quo without questioning it "banking education": "Banking education . . . attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way men exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing" (Freire 71). Some of the myths that oppressors attempt to "deposit" in the minds of the oppressed are, for example: "the myth that the oppressive order is a 'free society'; . . . the myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; . . . the myth of the equality of all men" (Freire 136-37). The question for those of us who teach argument in composition classrooms is whether our teaching will sustain these disenfranchising myths, or whether our teaching will challenge these myths and truly empower our students.

We may encounter resistance from two different kinds of students, both of whom have a stake in maintaining the liberal illusions of equality and freedom. One group of students may resist the idea that their membership in a privileged group gives them an unfair advantage on the plane of argument. We see this, for example, when white middle-class students argue that affirmative action is "reverse discrimination," invoking abstract fairness but ignoring the real identities of the parties to the dispute. The maintenance of their power depends on their moving the conflict out of the real world and into the abstractions of democratic participation, where they control all the rhetorical power but are allowed to pretend that they do not. Bell hooks discusses the

problem of teaching critical thinking to privileged students, who "are often downright unwilling to acknowledge that their minds have been colonized, that they have been learning how to be oppressors, how to dominate" (102).

A different group of students may resist being identified as a disenfranchised group, since they buy into the only possibility for power that liberal democracy offers them: a theoretical equality and freedom on the abstract plane of argument. We see this when minority students invoke the platitudes of the Declaration or the Constitution, documents that were intended to enfranchise only a fraction of the American population, and certainly not them. When they do this, they play into the hands of their opponents, whose power on the plane of argument derives from the material inequalities that both parties are eager to ignore. For these students, who imagine that they are being educated out of a disadvantaged group, being told that democratic equality and freedom are illusions may be "terribly threatening" (hooks 102).

How can we teach argument without perpetuating the myth of democratic participation? We can, as John Clifford recommends, "encourage self-consciousness [in our students] about who they are and can be in the social world" (51). We can teach students that the practice of argumentation on an abstract plane is not a practice of freedom, but a practice of either domination or submission. We can teach students that the scene of argumentation in the real world is not a scene free of inequality, but a scene created and determined by inequality. We can teach students to locate themselves and their adversaries within this scene. We can teach students to argue from the point of view of the embodied, engaged partisans that they are, and to demand that their adversaries do the same. We can, as bell hooks says, "engage students in a learning process that makes the world 'more rather than less real'" (51).

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